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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, student assessment has focused on measuring learner skills. Assessment of literacy needs, from the learner's perspective, is also an important part of an instructional program. This digest focuses on ways to determine what learners want or believe they need to learn. Many of the activities described can include or lead to assessment of proficiencies, and many of the sources cited include both types of assessment. Specific attention is focused on the definition of a needs assessment, the importance of a needs assessment, and assessment tools. In addition, a needs assessment conducted in one adult literacy program, the Adult Literacy Evaluation Project in Philadelphia (PA), is summarized. (VWL) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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ERIC Digest

Assessing the Literacy Needs of Adult Learners of ESL

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National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education

Assessing the Literacy Needs of Adult Learners of ESL

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If literacy is culturally learned and practiced, what is important is what counts as literacy to different groups and individuals within the society. (Lytle, 1988, p. 3)

Traditionally, student assessment has focused on measuring learner skills. Assessment of literacy needs, from the learner's perspective, is also an important part of an instructional program. This is particularly true for programs serving adults, who may have very specific and individualized learning goals and needs. An interest in learner needs assessment reflects a participatory approach to education, "based on the belief that learners, their characteristics, aspirations, backgrounds, and needs should be the center of literacy instruction" (Fingeret & Jurmo, 1989, p. 5).

Although learner needs assessment encompasses both what learners know and can do (learner proficiencies) and what they want to learn, this digest focuses on ways to determine *what learners want or believe they need to learn*. Many of the activities described can include or lead to assessment of proficiencies, and many of the sources cited include both types of assessment.

What Is Needs Assessment?

The word "assess" comes from the Latin term "assidere," which means to "sit beside." Process-minded and participatory-oriented adult educators "sit beside" learners to learn about their proficiencies and backgrounds, educational goals, and expected outcomes, immersing themselves in the lives and views of their students (see Auerbach, in press, for discussion).

A needs assessment for use with adult learners of English as a second language (ESL) is a tool that specifically examines, from the perspective of the learner, what kinds of English, native language, and literacy skills the learner already believes he or she has; the literacy contexts in which the learner lives and works; what the learner wants and needs to know to function in those contexts; what the learner expects to gain from the instructional program; and what might need to be done in the native language or with the aid of an interpreter. The needs assessment focuses and builds on learners' accomplishments and abilities rather than on deficits, allowing learners to articulate and display what they already know and what they already can do (Fingeret & Jurmo, 1989; Lytle, 1988).

Needs assessment is a continual process and takes place throughout the instructional program (Savage, 1988), thus influencing student placement, materials selection, curriculum design, and teaching approaches (Lytle, 1988). "The curriculum content and learning experiences to take place in class should be negotiated between learners, teacher, and coordinator at the beginning of the project and renegotiated regularly during the project" (Burnaby, 1989, p. 20). At the beginning of the program, needs assessment might be used to determine appropriate program types and course content; during the program, it assures that learner and program goals are being met and allows for necessary program changes; at the end of the program, it can be used for planning the learner's and the program's future directions.

Why Is Needs Assessment Important?

A needs assessment serves a number of purposes:

- It provides information to the instructor and learner about what the learner brings to the course (if done at the beginning), what has been accomplished (if during the course), and what the learner wants and needs to know next.
- It assures a flexible, responsive curriculum rather than a fixed, linear curriculum determined ahead of time by instructors.
- It aids administrators, teachers, and tutors in developing materials, curricula, skills assessments, teaching approaches, and teacher training.

According to a study by Bean, Partanen, Wright, and Aaronson (1989), factors that contribute to learner attrition in adult literacy programs include inappropriate placement and instructional materials and approaches that are not relevant to learners' needs and lives. When learners know that educators understand and want to address their needs and interests, they are motivated to continue in a program and to learn (see also the discussion of learner retention in Brod, 1990).

Assessment Tools

Needs assessments with ESL learners, as well as those in adult basic education programs, can take a variety of forms, including survey questionnaires on which learners check areas of interest or need, open-ended interviews, or informal observations of performance. (For discussion, see Auerbach, in press; Lytle & Wolfe, 1989.)

Survey questionnaires. Many types of questionnaires have been designed to determine learner literacy needs (see Auerbach, in press; Bodman & Lanzano, 1978; Graham, 1980; McKenzie, 1990; Savage, 1988 for examples). A portion of a questionnaire might look like this: (in English or the learner's native language).

What do you already know how to read in English? What do you want to learn to read?

	Already know	Want to learn
signs		
labels in stores		
the newspaper		
telephone bills		
GED textbooks, etc.		

FL 800 397

What do you already know how to write in English? What to you want to learn to write?

	Already know	Want to learn
letters		
notes to school		
job applications		
forms		
poetry, stories		
things for work, etc.		

(Adapted from Auerbach, in press, p. 218)

A survey developed by Graham (1980) uses the five areas of life-skills from the Adult Performance Level (APL) Study—government and law, health, consumer economics, community resources, and occupational knowledge (APL Project Staff, 1975). Students check their degree of interest in 25 items under each area.

Where necessary, the questionnaire can be translated into the learner's native language. For learners with no or limited literacy skills, the questionnaire can be read aloud (in English or the native language), or pictures showing different literacy contexts (using a telephone, buying groceries, driving a car, or taking public transportation) can be shown, and learners asked to mark the contexts that apply to them (see Liebowitz, 1988, for pictures).

Learner-compiled inventories of language and literacy use. A more open-ended way to get the same information as surveys offer is to have learners keep lists of ways they use language and literacy, which they update periodically.

Interviews with learners, either one-on-one or in small groups, in their native language or in English, can provide valuable information about what learners know, what their interests are, and the ways they use or hope to use literacy.

Review of reading materials. An instructor can spread out a range of reading materials on the table (newspapers, magazines, children's books, comics, greeting cards) and ask learners which ones they would like to read and whether they would like to work in class on any of them (Auerbach, in press, p. 220). A similar activity can be done with different types of writing.

Class discussions. Showing pictures of adults in various contexts, the teacher can ask, "What literacy skills does this person want to develop?" and have learners generate a list. The teacher then asks, "Why do *you* want to develop literacy skills?" Learners might be more open if they move from the impersonal to the personal in this way (Auerbach, in press, p. 116).

Personal or dialogue journals. Learners' journals, in which they write freely about their activities, experiences, and plans, can be a rich source of information about their literacy needs (Peyton & Staton, 1991).

Needs Assessment In One Adult Literacy Program

The assessment process of the Adult Literacy Evaluation Project (ALEP) in Philadelphia reflects the approaches described above. It focuses on four areas: (1) the functions and uses of literacy in learners' everyday lives; (2) learner goals and plans for literacy education; (3) learner abilities on a range of reading and writing tasks and the strategies used to accomplish those tasks; and (4) learner beliefs about reading, writing, and literacy (see Lytle & Wolfe, 1989, for a description of this and other programs). Planning conferences are conducted with learners when they enter the program and at regular intervals throughout their study. Learners describe the contexts in which they use literacy and they participate in activities that assess their interests and abilities—they choose printed texts to read and discuss; write texts; and respond to checklists of goals, indicating which ones they can already do, which are of particular interest to them, and which are not relevant or important. Learner progress is determined by: (1) analyzing the difficulty of reading texts learners have chosen, (2) noting the strategies learners use to approach those texts and their degree of engagement with them, and (3) reviewing learners' writings, collected in a portfolio.

Conclusion

Needs assessment can take many forms and can be carried out at different times during the instructional process. Whatever the focus and format, the basic purpose is to determine what students want and need to learn. When curriculum content, materials, and teaching approaches match students' perceived and actual needs, student motivation and learning success are enhanced.

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